

SAMTSKHE-JAVAKHETIA: WHAT WILL HAPPEN AFTER RUSSIA WITHDRAWS ITS MILITARY BASES FROM GEORGIA

Sergey MINASIAN

*Ph.D. (Hist.),
director of the Scientific-Research Center of
the Southern Caucasus' Regional Security and
Integration Problems,
Russian-Armenian (Slavic) State University,
researcher at the Institute of History,
Republic of Armenia National Academy of Sciences
(Erevan, Armenia)*

Introduction

On 30 May, 2005, high-ranking representatives from Moscow and Tbilisi signed a statement essentially signifying that an agreement had been reached on precise dates for Russia to begin withdrawing its military bases from Georgia. This document states that the Russian military bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki will cease their designated activity and begin functioning under withdrawal conditions from the moment this statement is signed. Their withdrawal should be completed in 2008.¹ This process, the schedule for which, according to both sides, is currently being fully observed in keeping with the agreement they have reached, could create certain threats to the physical safety of the Armenian res-

¹ See: Joint statement of the foreign ministers of the Russian Federation and Georgia [www.mid.ru], 30 May, 2005.

idents of Samtskhe-Javakhetia (if alternative ways to ensure their safety are not found),² as well as give rise to a new situation in the South Caucasian regional security system.

What is more, the withdrawal of the 62nd Russian military base from the administrative center of Javakhetia throughout 2005 set off certain political processes in this region, the danger of escalation of which required the joint participation of the Georgian and Armenian authorities in an attempt to resolve the urgent problems there. This element of Armenian-Georgian interstate relations is also extremely significant when reviewing the prospects for regional stability in the Southern Caucasus.

² For more detail, see: S. Minasian, "The Socioeconomic and Political Situation in Javakhetia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (33), 2005.

How the Process Began

According to the latest statements by official Moscow representatives, the Russian Federation has fully carried out the obligations it assumed in 2005 with respect to transferring several installa-

tions of the Russian Troop Group in the Southern Caucasus (RTGSC) to Georgia and withdrawing some of the military hardware and arms from the bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki. For example, in particular, an underground command point and RTGSC settlement in the Mtskheta District (the so-called Zvezda service module) located 20 km from Tbilisi have been transferred. This unique facility, the bunker of which is capable of fending off not only direct bombings, but also nuclear strikes, was built as early as Soviet times (in 1959-1969) and was intended for housing the headquarters of the then Red Banner Transcaucasian Military District during wartime.³ According to the head command of the Russian Federation Ground Forces, a total of 13 military installations were transferred to Georgia during this period. They include the 142nd armored repair factory, the dormitory of the RTGSC military council in the settlement of Krtsanisi, fuel and lubricant warehouses in Kumisi and Nasosnaia, an army club sports base, the underground Zvezda service module already mentioned, and a data-relay satellite system in Kojori (a suburb of the capital) deployed at the Tbilisi garrison (the bunker in Mtskheta also belongs to this garrison). The Voentorg base and dug-in division command point in the village of Vachiani have been transferred from the Akhalkalaki garrison, and army food stores, four residential settlements, and the testing ground in Gonio (8 km from Batumi) from the Batumi garrison. Before September, 20 T-72 tanks, 12 Cube surface-to-air missile systems, 3 Shilka ZSU-23-4 self-propelled antiaircraft artillery guns, and five armored reconnaissance vehicles were transported to Novorossiisk by sea from Batumi on landing ships of the Black Sea Fleet. In keeping with the agreement, another 53 vehicles and 42 trailers were traveling independently by road to the Russian Federation. Several units of wheeled hardware have also been transported from the 62nd Akhalkalaki base to the 102nd Russian base in Giumri (Armenia). Means of chemical protection, surface-to-air missiles, and other weapons and equipment have been sent there by rail from the 12th base (Batumi). Transfer of most of the heavy hardware should begin around April 2006. What is more, there are plans to send several motor convoys from the bases in Batumi and Akhalkalaki to Russia via the Georgian Military Road before the end of 2005.⁴

After withdrawal of the Russian bases from Georgia, the 102nd base deployed in Giumri will essentially be the only combat-ready Russian installation with a specific legal status in the Southern Caucasus (apart from the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan called upon to maintain control over the launching of missiles in the Indian Ocean, but this is a special case). If the equipping and military transit of the Russian military base in Armenia is to depend entirely on the will of official Tbilisi (taking into account its very obvious orientation toward Washington and Brussels), this gives rise to doubts about the prospects and even expediency of Moscow's continued military presence in the region. The withdrawal of military bases from Georgia could pose a serious threat to Russian-Armenian military cooperation because the integrated air defense system in the southerly direction will be violated, since many command points of the Russian air defense system deployed in the region since as early as Soviet times are located on Georgian territory. This will lead to a significant reduction in control over the air space in the Southern Caucasus and a decrease in the efficiency of Armenia's air defense, which is correlated with the Russian air defense system of the North Caucasian Military District.⁵

But this is only the beginning. As Georgian military expert Irakli Aladashvili notes, the closing of the above-mentioned bases could create serious problems not only with supplying Russian military installations in Armenia, but also with military transit to this republic, which is a very active member

³ See: Iu. Gavrilov. "Iaderny bunker dlia Saakashvili: gruzinskie voennye poluchili v svoe rasporiazhenie rossiiskii sekretny obiekt," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 7 September, 2005.

⁴ See: S. Minasian. "Kavkazskii transit: Tbilisi khochet vziat pod svoi kontrol voennye kommunikatsii rossiiskikh voisk," *Voenno-promyshlennyi kurier*, No. 37 (104), 5-11 October, 2005.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In particular, in the event of a crisis situation (for example, if hostilities with Azerbaijan resume), it may be impossible for the CSTO allies to supply the Republic of Armenia with weapons and hardware. In this situation, Georgia “will try to prevent any additional delivery of Russian arms through its territory” and maintain “neutrality.”⁶ Although it goes without saying that in this case Georgia will no longer be seen objectively as a neutral state, since it will be creating a complete blockade, primarily to deprive Armenia of access to the sea. Armenia has been denied this access for more than 10 years now anyway by Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, another very important aspect should be mentioned. Some Tbilisi experts are still claiming that even after withdrawal of the Russian bases, the Russian Federation and the population “which sympathizes with it” in the former Georgian autonomies and in other territories densely populated by ethnic minorities will continue to pose a threat to Georgia’s national security. In particular, Alexander Rusetsky, who works at the Analytical Center for Security Affairs of the South Caucasus Institute of Regional Security (SCIRS), notes: “Russia’s influence in the Southern Caucasus is waning, but its presence (including military) in Georgia is inevitable in the near future and may only come to an end in the event of a bloody war and the total destruction or ousting of pro-Russian political groups and the citizens who support them, primarily out of Abkhazia, the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region, and Samtskhe-Javakhetia. And it is unlikely this will occur as innocuously as it did in Ajaria in May 2004.”⁷ It is very possible that after these bases have been completely withdrawn, official Tbilisi will raise the question of putting an end to the presence of the Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as of the “neutralization” of the Armenian “political groups and the citizens who support them” in Javakhetia.

As for the first aspect, the Georgian authorities have already taken specific steps and put forward an initiative about the withdrawal of the Russian peacekeepers from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. And as for the situation in Samtskhe-Javakhetia, official Tbilisi is unlikely to share Alexander Rusetsky’s opinion. The country’s administration is making loud statements about its willingness to resolve the political and socioeconomic problems facing the local Armenian population. But if after the withdrawal of the 62nd Russian military base in Akhalkalaki, Georgia takes some forceful action aimed against the Armenian political groups and movements (particularly in light of the political processes going on recently in the region and the demands of the local population for broader self-government), it could become a serious threat to the prospects for South Caucasian regional security. After all, official Yerevan will not remain impartial to the fate of its fellow countrymen living in Javakhetia.

Political Processes in Samtskhe-Javakhetia: Demands for Autonomy and Official Tbilisi’s Old Techniques

After the events of March 2005⁸ (mass protest acts and demonstrations by the Armenian population against the withdrawal of the 62nd Russian base), experts predicted that in order to establish

⁶ “Zakrytie rossiiskoi bazy v Gruzii meniaet strategicheskii balans,” *Kavkazskii informatsionny ezhenedelnik*, IWPR, No. 293-296, June-July 2005.

⁷ A. Rusetsky, “Protsess vyvoda rossiiskikh baz—ugroza natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Gruzii?” [www.pankisi.info], 7 September, 2005.

⁸ See: G. Hokobyan, Large Demonstration in Javakhetia Marks Increased Tensions // *Central Asia — Caucasus Analyst*, Vol. 6, No. 7, 6 April, 2005.

more effective control and reduce tension in Javakhetia, official Tbilisi might take a “new approach” which differed slightly from the methods used at one time there by Eduard Shevardnadze. Whereas he placed the stakes on fomenting controversy between the two main political and economic groups of Javakhk, some national experts and government representatives believed that the country’s leadership was ready to go for an abrupt change in political elite in this Armenian-populated region by replacing it with young local officials who had received an accelerated education in Tbilisi and been hastily promoted to the main ruling posts in the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts. But in reality, the new situation proved to be little different from the previous: the Georgian government is still putting its stakes on fomenting controversy between the political groups of Javakhk. Consequently, it can be said that the policy of Mikhail Saakashvili’s government toward Javakhk is a direct continuation of the “divide and rule” method used by official Tbilisi as early as Shevardnadze’s era. What is even worse, due to the patronage of the central authorities, in Samtskhe-Javakhetia and several contiguous regions populated by Armenians, incidents of discrimination are continuing and the rights of national minorities still violated.⁹

For example, on 27 June, 2005, in the Greek village of Goleank in the Tsalka District (which borders on the Ninotsminda District of Samtskhe-Javakhetia), members of a special contingent of the Georgian Interior Ministry opened fire with machineguns and severely wounded a resident of the Armenian village of Kyzylkilis (he was rushed to a hospital in Tbilisi).¹⁰ These contingents were brought into the region by a decision of the central authorities in 2004, when as a result of the conflicts between the Armenians and the Greeks living in the Tsalka District, on the one side, and the Ajarians who have moved there in recent years, on the other, a tense situation arose. But, as it turned out, the Georgian special forces could not maintain an impartial position, and, taking advantage of the powers they were given, began to use force. In particular, they even brutally beat up Aika Melitonian, a parliamentary deputy from Tsalka.¹¹

Another incident took place in July 2005 in the village of Samsar in the Akhalkalaki District, where local residents expressed their discontent about the actions of a group of Georgian students, priests, and nuns, who with the connivance of the gubernatorial authorities forced their way onto the grounds of the village’s Armenian church, destroyed several khachkars (stone crosses), and tried to get into the church sanctuary. The local residents, after blocking up the entrance with stones, prevented them from breaking into the church. Only police intervention helped to prevent an open clash.¹²

The euphoria aroused by the Rose Revolution and bloodless restoration of official Tbilisi’s control over Ajaria generated the illusion among certain members of the country’s ruling elite that national minorities could be forcibly integrated into Georgian society and that they could carry out the same methods in Samtskhe-Javakhetia. But after several conflicts generated by the authorities, the local residents only became more convinced that the real goal of the Georgian political elite was in no way to resolve Javakhk’s mounting problems and the evolutionary involvement of the Armenian minority in the economic and sociopolitical life of the state, but to completely oust or assimilate the non-Georgian ethnic element.

⁹ See: S. Minasian, “The Sociopolitical and Political Situation in Javakhk Today,” *21-i vek* (information and analytical journal of the Noravank Foundation), No. 1, 2005, pp. 66-71 (in Armenian); Sturm shkoly i izbienie uchenikov armianskoi shkoly v Gruzii: podrobnosti [www.regnum.ru], 8 July, 2005.

¹⁰ See: “Gruzinski spetsnaz ‘dal poshchechinu vsem armaniam i natmenshinstvam Gruzii’” [www.regnum.ru], 30 July, 2005.

¹¹ See: “Gruzinski spetsnaz izbil deputata armianskoi national’nosti [www.regnum.ru], 6 May, 2005.

¹² See: “V Samtskhe-Javakheti (Gruzia) pereosviashchena armianskaia tserkov Sv. Bogoroditsy” [www.regnum.ru], 3 August, 2005.

Against the background of such incidents, some political parties and movements began to join forces and put forward political initiatives they felt could prevent a negative development of events in Javakhetia. On 23-24 September, 2005 in Akhalkalaki (the region's administrative center), the Third Sociopolitical Initiative Conference "Integration, Not Assimilation" on the topic "Javakhk's status in the State Structure of Georgia" was held. The two previous conferences held within the framework of this initiative were devoted to the socioeconomic situation in the region (11 December, 2004), as well as to questions of culture and education (2 April, 2005). At the last one, an address to the country's leadership was adopted which contained an appeal to grant the region of Samtskhe-Javakhetia (within its current administrative borders) and contiguous population points of Kvemo-Kartli, where most of the residents are also Armenians, the status of an autonomous federal constituency of Georgia with broad self-government powers, including the right for the local population to elect all local self-government bodies, as well as make the Armenian language the second official language in the region.¹³

The attempts by official Tbilisi to ignore the decisions of the two previous conferences is one of the reasons why the organizers of the conference on 23-24 September were forced to couch their demands to the country's authorities on political issues in more concise terms. Whereby, like all the previous initiatives, the present one fully corresponds to current Georgian legislation, basic democratic principles, and the rights and freedoms of national minorities (in harmony with current international and European standards). Along with this, such radical steps by Javakhkian society were prompted by the difficult economic and political situation that has developed in the region in recent years, as well as by the not entirely sincere, and superficial measures of the Georgian leadership to improve it and carry out corresponding reforms and implement economic rehabilitation programs in the area. What is more, after the Rose Revolution and advent of the new government headed by Mikhail Saakashvili, instances of discrimination by the country's leaders against Armenians for national reasons, as well as other instances, have become more frequent in Javakhetia.¹⁴ (Incidentally, a very similar situation is also developing in the eastern regions of Georgia populated mainly by Azeris, particularly in Kvemo-Kartli).

Nevertheless, the sociopolitical forces in Javakhk are still hoping to hold a political dialog with the authorities to find a compromise solution to the problem of granting the territory its autonomy. For example, on 16 November in Akhalkalaki, there was a regular plenary session of the Council of Armenian Public Organizations of Samtskhe-Javakhetia, during which the question was discussed of gathering signatures to put forward a legislative initiative based on the above-mentioned resolution of the Council conference held on 23-24 September, 2005. In particular, the Council made a decision, before gathering signatures, to inform the country's parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze about its initiative. (What is more, it was suggested that parliamentary hearings be held to discuss granting Javakhk the status of an autonomy and federal constituency of Georgia, thus dispensing with the need to gather signatures.) The suggestion to organize a meeting to discuss this question with Nino Burjanadze was supported at the conference. But the country's leaders still have no intention of discussing this initiative.

The leadership's unwillingness to take the opinion and rights of national minorities into account in its policy is also made clear by the new draft law on local self-government, which not only does not envisage greater decentralization, but could even deprive the regions of a minimum level of self-government.¹⁵ What is more, official Tbilisi refuses to accept most of the recommendations of the Vene-

¹³ See: "Armiame Samtskhe-Javakheti zaiavili o shirokoi avtonomni (Gruzia)" [www.regnum.ru], 26 September, 2005; Iu. Simonian, "Armiame Javakhetii trebuiut avtonomni," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 26 September, 2005.

¹⁴ See: S. Minasian, "The Socioeconomic and Political Situation in Javakhetia," pp. 144-149.

¹⁵ See: N. Khutsidze, "Reforma samoupravleniia na politicheskoi povestke [www.civil.ge], 4 November, 2005.

tian Commission, as well as of several other international organizations, which clearly indicate that the country should observe the obligations it assumed to decentralize power, encourage local self-government, and protect the rights and freedoms of national minorities. Whereby this is manifested not only with respect to regions with a predominant Armenian or Azerbaijani population. It is enough to recall the actions of the Georgian leaders to reduce Ajaria's autonomy to essentially nil after Aslan Abashidze was expelled from the republic.

Hoping to draw support from the European community, in the fall of 2004, the Council of Sociopolitical Organizations of Samtskhe-Javakhetia asked the PACE Monitoring Commission to take heed of Georgia's non-fulfillment of the many obligations it assumed when it entered this organization (in particular, ratification of the Framework Convention of the Council of Europe in Defense of National Minorities, which was talked about as early as 1995), which was interfering with an adequate perception of official Tbilisi's policy. Incidentally, this explains why its European partners, clearly recognizing all the negative consequences of violating the rights of national minorities in the country for Georgia's normal development and stability, included ratification of this convention and other relevant European documents as a necessary condition for implementing the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO. And only after that did Georgia ratify this convention in October 2005. Admittedly, things still have not gone as far as granting regions densely populated by national minorities the opportunity to carry out real self-government.

Unfortunately, the country's national political elite and its expert-analyst community are still not ready to take this step. The ethno-national trauma suffered by post-Soviet Georgia during the first half of the 1990s is still taking its toll. After losing two of its former autonomies (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) as the result of the bloody conflicts, Georgian society is unable to soften its attitude toward other regions densely populated by national minorities—Samtskhe-Javakhetia and Kvemo-Kartli. This is precisely why the hopes of the Armenians of Javakhetia for an improvement in the region's socioeconomic and political situation are not being justified, despite the many formal and declarative statements official Tbilisi made after the Rose Revolution. The methods being used by the new Georgian government are reminiscent of the policy of Eduard Shevardnadze's era. The local Armenian population also fears for its physical safety, especially since there are no alternative mechanisms for ensuring it after the 62nd Russian military base is completely withdrawn from Akhalkalaki.

The unwillingness of the Georgian authorities and political elite to reach compromises with the national minorities living in the country was confirmed in particular by the clash between the city's residents and employees of the Georgian power structures. This happened on 5 October, 2005 in Akhalkalaki.¹⁶ The incident was evaluated as an attempt by Tbilisi to exert pressure on the local population after they put forward their demands for autonomy. Incidentally, the dynamics of the political processes in Samtskhe-Javakhetia are not yet prompting more serious incidents (if of course the authorities do not instigate them to resolve their own problems). Armenia is playing the part of a deterrent here by striving to alleviate the political demands of the Javakhkian Armenians, on the one hand, and preventing official Tbilisi from taking any rash steps in the region, on the other. The Georgian political elite recognizes this, but nevertheless exaggerates the real influence of the 62nd Russian military base deployed in Akhalkalaki on the political processes in the region. In the words of David Berdzenishvili, a leader of the Georgian Republican Party and parliament member, "Javakhetia is not Tbilisi, and Moscow and Erevan are the main political players."¹⁷ Nevertheless, im-

¹⁶ See: "V Akhalkalaki proizoshel intsident mezhdru politsiei i mestnym naseleniem [www.newsgeorgia.ru], 6 October, 2005.

¹⁷ D. Berdzenishvili, "Glavnaia vnutrennaia problema Gruzii," in: *Diaspora, neft i rozy: chem zhivut strany Yuzhnogo Kavkaza*, Erevan, 2005, p. 157.

mediately after the incident on 5 October, 2005, adviser to the Armenian president on national security Garnik Isagulian said: "The Georgian authorities should be extremely cautious and attentive in their actions, since even the slightest provocation could escalate into widespread clashes."¹⁸ What is more, he stressed that foreign forces are not involved in the incidents in the region.¹⁹ So an important stabilizing factor in Javakhk should be cooperation between Georgia and Armenia aimed, in addition to everything else, at resolving the acute socioeconomic and political problems of this region.

The Javakhk Problem in Armenian-Georgian Interstate Relations

Ignoring this problem could essentially have a negative effect on Armenian-Georgian interstate relations, while its successful resolution will promote extensive and stable development of their bilateral relations in the spirit of good-neighborly sentiments and close cooperation. The problems facing Armenians living in other regions of Georgia, as well as related issues pertaining to the preservation of the Armenian historical, cultural, and architectural heritage in this country are just as important. But these issues have become aggravated again, particularly in recent months when several members of the Georgian Orthodox Church tried to seize a number of Armenian churches, for example the Norashen church²⁰ located in the very center of Tbilisi, and the church in the village of Samsar in the Akhalkalaki District. On the whole, history has always been (and still is) a vital political factor in the Caucasus, so disputes about the cultural heritage of the Armenians in present-day Georgia play a very prominent role in Armenian-Georgian relations at all levels, from everyday to interstate.

The opinion is currently circulating in certain circles of Georgian politicians that Armenia is not putting sufficient restraints on the "separatist sentiments" which have supposedly appeared in the Javakhk Region. But official Yerevan has often tried to explain to Tbilisi at the highest level that undermining its statehood has never been (and will never be) in the interests of Armenia or of the Armenian part of Georgia's population. Of course, Armenia is demanding that the population of Javakhk have sufficient guarantee of its safety, socioeconomic development, local self-government, and preservation of the Armenian culture, language, and education. But these very modest and natural demands do not contradict the fundamental goals of Georgia and its statehood. What is more, many people in Yerevan do not understand post-Soviet Tbilisi's excessively "jaundiced" attitude toward all of Armenia's initiatives to stabilize the sociopolitical and economic situation in Javakhk. Nor can it be understood why Tbilisi is just as "jaundiced" toward all the actions and suggestions from the Armenian diaspora with respect to implementing economic projects, particularly since their aim is to stimulate the region's socioeconomic rehabilitation. All of these factors must be kept in mind when analyzing the problem of Javakhk in Armenian-Georgian interstate relations.

After the mass demonstrations of the Javakhkian Armenians against the withdrawal of Russian bases from Georgia (13 and 31 March, 2005), Mikhail Saakashvili invited the Armenian president to

¹⁸ "Ofitsial'ny predstavitel Yerevana prizyvaet Tbilisi k ostorozhnosti v Samtskhe-Javakheti" [www.civil.ge], 10 October, 2005.

¹⁹ See: "Rossiiskie spetssluzhby ne prichastny k intsidentam v Samtskhe-Javakheti" [www.regnum.ru], 8 October, 2005.

²⁰ See: "Mikhail Saakashvili voznamerilsia 'polnostiu pokonchit s armianskim kul'turnym sloem'" [www.regnum.ru], 22 April, 2005.

visit Georgia (3-4 April). Its results (although they were essentially not publicized) had an important impact on the further development of events in the region and on the dynamics of Armenian-Georgian interstate relations. As informed sources testify, both sides held on tightly to their own viewpoints, but in general heard what they wanted to hear from their counterparts. President Robert Kocharian assured official Tbilisi that the withdrawal of the Russian bases was Georgia's internal affair, that is, Armenia did not intend to interfere in this process. What is more, the Georgian authorities stated that they were planning to implement an economic rehabilitation program in Samtskhe-Javakhetia and (which is also very important) would help to establish cooperation in this respect between the corresponding departments of both countries. According to several Russian experts, Robert Kocharian's visit to Georgia also helped to make Moscow more conciliatory in the talks with Tbilisi about withdrawing its bases, since the Russian Federation was expecting that the situation may be aggravated due to the Javakhetian Armenians and even official Erevan being drawn into this process.

During this meeting between the presidents, which was followed by several reciprocal visits of these heads of state (on 21-22 August Robert Kocharian and Mikhail Saakashvili met again in an unofficial setting, this time in Armenia at Sevan Lake), an agreement was also reached about a joint trip to Samtskhe-Javakhetia by the prime ministers of these countries, Andranik Markarian and Zurab Nogaideli, which clearly signaled an increase in trust in the interstate relations between Armenia and Georgia (on 24 July, 2005, the prime ministers met on the Georgian-Armenian border). As expected, the urgent problems faced by this region and the possibilities of resolving them with the assistance of the Armenian government were discussed during this meeting. "We will look at several questions of economic cooperation between our states, we will mainly discuss how to jointly develop this region too," the Georgian prime minister told journalists. He emphasized that Samtskhe-Javakhetia was in need of an improved transportation infrastructure, and that the Georgian and Armenian governments would work together toward this end. "We need to develop roads and create possibilities for economic development. We will do that quite quickly. In the next three to four years, this region will be unrecognizable," said Nogaideli.²¹ Then the prime ministers went to the village of Gandza where they visited the museum of Armenian poet Vaan Terian, a church, and a school which was being built. They also participated in a ceremony devoted to the 120th anniversary of Vaan Terian. What is more, they went to Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki, where they met with the local population and visited the Armenian church in the town of Akhalkalaki and the church complex of Vardzia (on the banks of the River Kura).²² This visit was important in that, compared to all the previous ones, it took place after the large-scale and serious events going on in this region over the past few months, which could have a significant impact not only on the development of the overall geopolitical situation in the Southern Caucasus, but also on the prospects for the relations between Armenia and Georgia, including in the context of the situation which is developing with respect to the withdrawal of the 62nd military base from Akhalkalaki and the Javakhetian Armenians' reaction to this.

Two months later, on 29-30 September, a very representative delegation from Georgia visited Erevan headed by Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Nogaideli. During this meeting, there were plans to hold a regular (fourth) meeting of the intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation, that is, it was not prompted by the events in Javakhetia, but merely coincided time-wise with the above-mentioned initiatives by the region's Armenian sociopolitical organizations about granting autonomy. So it is very natural that during the talks between the Georgian premier, Andranik Markarian, and his Armenian colleague, President Robert Kocharian, an important place went to discussing problems related to the development of the situation in Javakhetia.

²¹ "Premier-ministr Gruzii obeshchaet sdelat region Javakhetii neuznavayemyy" [www.regnum.ru], 24 July, 2005.

²² See: "Premier-ministry Gruzii i Armenii vstretilis na gruzino-armianskoi granitse" [www.regnum.ru], 24 July, 2005.

The 23-24 September, 2005 initiatives by the Council of Sociopolitical Organizations of Samtskhe-Javakhetia aroused a feeble, but nevertheless negative reaction among the Georgian authorities, expert circles, and mass media. But the problem is that official Tbilisi's attempts to ignore the processes going on in the region should in some way be correlated to the permanent practice of consultations established in the post-Soviet period with Erevan for smoothing out problem situations in Javakhk. As early as the first years of Georgia's independence, particularly following Eduard Shevardnadze's "reign," the country's leadership was forced to intercession by its Armenian colleagues in order to achieve advantageous results in relations with the residents of this region. This also applied to support by its Armenian residents of Shevardnadze's ruling party at the parliamentary and presidential elections and containment of the demands put forward by several local sociopolitical organizations on federalization or improvement of the socioeconomic situation in Javakhk, and so on. And the new Georgian government, which came to power as a result of the Rose Revolution, was forced to inherit this approach from the previous regime in order in some way to "rectify" the development of the sociopolitical processes in Javakhk. Under conditions where the political parties essentially had no support from the population and society of Javakhk and official Tbilisi evaluated influential local organizations as not entirely loyal or too radical, the country's leadership could rely only on help and understanding from official Erevan, which for very understandable reasons also enjoyed great prestige among the residents of this region. In other words, Tbilisi was interested to a certain extent in reinforcing the practice of Erevan's "allied control" over the situation and processes in Javakhk.

Based on this, the evaluations of the latest political initiatives by the region's Armenian members of society promulgated at the joint press conference of the prime ministers of Georgia and Armenia on 29 September, 2005 proved extremely predictable. According to Zurab Nogaideli, "the public organizations demanding the status of an autonomy for Javakhetia constitute only a small percentage of the territory's population, which does not realistically represent all of its residents." Prime Minister Markarian, who supported his Georgian colleague, said: "I do not think such a question exists, but it is raised every time someone finds it necessary."²³ Although it stands to reason that the statements made during the press conference were clarified somewhat in private talks, and that both sides reached certain unpublicized agreements about the situation in Samtskhe-Javakhetia. The reaction of the heads of government of both countries showed that they are seriously worried about the Javakhk problem turning into an important domestic political factor both in Erevan and in Tbilisi.

Nevertheless, as an analysis of several aspects of the situation shows, Tbilisi and Erevan are not taking into account that today Samtskhe-Javakhetia significantly differs from the realities of the Shevardnadze epoch. Despite the difficult socioeconomic situation of the past few decades, a civil society is actively forming in the region, and local political movements are playing an increasingly greater role in its everyday life. The population is also putting forward well-considered and substantiated demands in defense of their rights and freedoms. As a result, the previous methods of the central authorities for resolving crisis situations are no longer effectively restricting the sociopolitical activity of the Armenian members of the population. Correspondingly, Tbilisi's old techniques aimed at restraining the processes in Javakhk (relying on several politicians and certain political forces in Erevan) may not work either. What is more, Tbilisi's further appeals to the Armenian authorities in such situations could lead to the Javakhkian Armenians' less adequate perception of official Erevan. Despite the stereotype taking root in Tbilisi, the current political processes in this region are mainly of a local nature, and are not inspired from outside, as many members of Georgian society seem to think.

²³ "Nogaideli: 'v Gruzii budet tri avtonomii—Ajarskaia, Abkhazskaia i Tshinval'skaia'" [www.regnum.ru], 29 September, 2005.

C o n c l u s i o n

The Georgian authorities are only hurting themselves by continuing to try and resolve the problems of Javakhk by means of administrative “peacekeeping” or by ignoring the sociopolitical initiatives of its population. This practice is primarily detrimental to the strategic goal which the country’s political elite has set itself with respect to national minorities—to integrate and incorporate them as much as possible into the country’s sociopolitical and cultural life. It is another attempt to avoid resolving several prime political problems (protection of human and national minority rights, and development of local self-government), which on the whole is also creating conflict potential in Samtskhe-Javakhetia. Georgian society and the political elite should honestly decide if they are ready, whereby taking into account their current experience of relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to liberalize their approach to the country’s national minorities who densely populate certain regions and comprise the absolute majority of the population in these areas. Only then will the Armenians, one of the state-forming ethnic groups of Georgia who traditionally play an important role in its history, have natural stimuli for real integration into the sociopolitical and cultural community of this country.

What is more, there are several problems which are unlikely to be resolved in the near future by the efforts of both countries’ power structures alone. For along with the specific political and socioeconomic difficulties noted at present in the region, there are problems whose solutions do not entirely depend on official Tbilisi, or which are not the result of its policy (for example, one of these problems is protection of the Armenian cultural and architectural heritage in Georgia). Nevertheless, in the near future, they may prove to be just as urgent as the severe socioeconomic situation, language problems, participation in the local and state government system, and decentralization of power, whereby not only for the Armenians living in Javakhk, but for the whole of Georgia as well. A broad Armenian-Georgian public dialogue must be maintained to resolve them. And official contacts between the leaders of both states, including on Javakhk’s problems, can only ensure that this dialog becomes more specific and targeted.

What is more, it should be noted that when withdrawal of the Russian bases is stepped up, Georgia should pay greater attention to the security interests of its regional neighbor. Tbilisi, on the one hand, should take into account Armenia’s security interests (as a member of the CSTO and Russia’s active ally). Erevan will evaluate any attempts (with all the ensuing consequences) to put restrictions on its military communication lines or on the communication lines of the 102nd Russian base in Giumri (particularly in the event of a new twist in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) as openly hostile steps in favor of Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Georgia should keep in mind Armenia’s activation of its European and Euro-Atlantic integration. For example, by maintaining its alliance relations with Russia, Armenia has recently made significant progress in the security sphere along the path to strengthening cooperation with NATO. In this area, it is only half a step behind Georgia, and in terms of some technical parameters of partnership with the North Atlantic Organization, it has essentially already surpassed Azerbaijan. With respect to cooperation with the EU, particularly in the format of the European Union’s new European Neighborhood Policy, Armenia and Georgia have achieved essentially the same results and are on equal terms (in contrast to Azerbaijan). Based on these factors, the political reference points of Erevan and Tbilisi are no longer as contradictory as they seemed before to those who talked about Erevan’s lack of alternative to Armenian-Russian cooperation in security and the threats ensuing from this for Georgia.

So close Armenian-Georgian cooperation in foreign policy and security could become a reality in the midterm, which will lead to a new situation in the South Caucasian regional security system.

But along with this, Georgia's reckoning with Armenia's opinion in security should be accompanied by serious adjustment of Tbilisi's approaches to resolving the political and socioeconomic problems of the Javakhkian Armenians, including with respect to searching for new mechanisms to ensure their physical safety after the withdrawal of the Russian troops. In this area, Tbilisi and Erevan should look for a common partner, that is, a third party capable of guaranteeing development of their political relations as an element of stability and security throughout the Southern Caucasus.
